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The Queer Epistemologies: Challenges to the Modes of Knowing about Sexuality in Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Sexuality became a matter of national concern for the Russian government in 2013, when the Duma passed the law banning 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' within its national jurisdiction (Kondakov, 2014a). The Russian government has also promoted 'traditional family values' at the United Nations (Wilkinson, 2014), raising increased international concerns. Both strategies of regulating sexuality, national and international, primarily target queer sexualities. Since 1993, when male homosexuality was decriminalized, Russia has tended to ignore this topic in its legal and policy frame- works. The rise of legal and political interest in homosexuality marked the path to Russia's 'sexual sovereignty': the Russian government now openly con- fronts the global trend of ensuring inclusive sexual citizenship, labelling it as sexual colonization (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2015; Morozov, 2015: 121; compare Weeks, 2016: 110). This hostile policy clearly delineates what political elites view as a particularly Russian understanding of sexuality. Nonetheless, in what follows, this chapter scrutinizes and clarifies the relations between these local and more general notions of queer sexuality, showing that these are not separate concepts. This analysis investigates the process of knowledge production about sexuality in contemporary conditions. More specifically, I want to examine a current epistemology that I call 'queer epistemology' for its unclear boundaries, fluidness, and resistance to stability of the notions used in

Russian debates about sexuality. Russian sexuality studies is an exemplary case of queer epistemology.

Various disciplinary boundaries and theoretical assumptions that inform the field of sexuality studies might be uncertain depending on the historical, social, and political conditions in which they unfold. Russian academic research on queer sexualities serves as an example of the more general possibilities of politicizing social science through queer approaches. As not all my examples advance egalitarian and democratic treatment of queerness, I should acknowledge that I am not arguing against the very intention of political bias in social science. On the contrary, my own approach to research is political – both feminist and queer. Yet I want to show how certain methodological assumptions (standpoint, for example) of social studies might be taken for granted and anticipated in some contexts, while the very same elements might produce important challenges for scholars and people affected by social science knowledge in other contexts. Examples include the regulation of queer sexualities in Russia and the debates within hostile academic publications.

To present the state of affairs of queer studies in Russia, I focus on the search for the subject of discourse in Russian sexuality scholarship. Michel Foucault famously argued that the emergence of homosexual subjectivity could be identified in Europe when psychopathological science took centre stage in debates around sexuality in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1978). He con- tended that science challenged the religious discourse of sinful practices of sodomy through scholarly estimations and, by doing so, it produced a particular human species, the homosexual. The subject that represents this discourse in regard to queer sexuality since then has been described in psychological terms. This contributed to the construction of homosexuality in the West as identity – a psychological type, even though the homosexual species has gone through a number of transformations and acquired many new names, not least 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'queer'. The subject still relies on the medical notion of sexual orientation as inherent to a person and, therefore, the idea that a person is 'born this way'.

Looking at the production and modification of the homosexual subject, I will scrutinize the shift in disciplinary 'responsibility' for thinking about sexuality from psychopathological and medical science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to social and political sciences in the twenty-first century. This shift is best exemplified by legal expertise that underpinned the cases used to inform the ban of 'homosexual propaganda' in Russia. While considering these cases, judges and prosecutors frequently refer to social science experts to evaluate the potential transfer of homosexuality from one person to another by means of information (what is termed homosexual 'propaganda'). The use of social science in courts might be found in other jurisdictions, such as cases in the United States when conservative activists used constructivist arguments to show it was possible to become, rather than be born, a homosexual (Halley, 1993/1994). Thus, I look at

the debates around the 'born this way' idea from the Russian context, a different angle which is potentially fruitful.

Throughout the text, I mostly use the term 'queer' as an umbrella to refer to the variety of forms of sexuality and sexual contexts in Russian history. I do this for two reasons. Firstly, Russian scholarship discussed queer sexualities in derogatory terms, especially in the past, which made me reluctant to reproduce that vocabulary. Secondly, I advance Judith Butler's (1993: 228) understanding of the term 'queer' as something which 'emerged as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability' which is 'never fully owned, but always redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in direction of urgent and expanding political purposes'. This definition prioritizes fluidity of the meaning of queerness and its unstable character, making it well suited to the situation in Russia where non-heterosexual identities have never been fully stabilized (Essig, 1999). I discuss it in more detail in the following section.

WHAT IS THE HOMOSEXUAL SUBJECT?

Foucault described the production of the homosexual subject by scientific dis- course mostly on the basis of French material. Nonetheless, the very same pro- cesses with varying degrees of intensity occurred in some other national contexts, marking the shift of episteme from religious to scientific production of knowledge. Marianna Muravyeva (2012) showed that in early modern Russia – mostly before the eighteenth century – this process was already under way. Dan Healey (2001) traced the formation of identities of the 'sexual dissidents' based on psychological subjectivity from late-nineteenth-century Russia to the beginning of the Soviet epoch. This shift in the notion of homosexuality from a religious framework to a scientific discourse made it important to seek court expertise in scholarly work when considering legal matters regarding homo- sexuality. This was especially so in criminal legal cases against consensual male homosexual intercourse. Given Soviet officials' general fascination with science (Healey, 2009), Soviet courts would also have done so if criminal law against homosexual practices had existed in the early USSR. Yet this was not the case. Male homosexuality was criminalized only in 1934, but enjoyed relative freedom in the first 17 years

of Soviet statehood. Other sexual legal issues, such as rape or harassment (Johnson, 2009: 24), fell under the jurisdiction of medical experts and were issues of major concern for forensic science in the USSR (Healey, 2009).

During the period when homosexuality was criminalized in the USSR (1934– 93), deliberations about sexuality were silenced (Naiman, 1997; Alexander, 2018: 350). The rationale behind criminalization was revealed in political discussions associating homosexuality with fascism. This was part of the biopolitical project

of the Communist Party that ensured people's contribution to reproduction of the new Soviet nation by prohibiting abortion and banning 'deviant' (non-pro- creative) sexualities (Healey, 2014: 176). This turn in political attitudes towards queer sexuality marked a certain departure from the scientific notion of homo- sexuality to its development in political and social science terms. Psychologists remained experts in homosexuality to some degree, but they were constrained in their abilities to articulate their research findings without acknowledging the general party line on a particular issue. In fact, no academic discipline was free from the requirement for political compliance: in every field, scholars had to check their ideas with the interpretation of the issue in question by the Party's Central Committee, as revealed in leadership addresses at the time and in openings to academic journals (Kon, 2008).

In Russia, this situation came to be known as 'police science': scholars' primary task was to confirm government opinion with research findings even if actual research results contradicted the Party's position (Filippov, 2014). Scholars had the function of policing and controlling citizens with the tools of academia by producing politically coerced knowledge, confirming government decisions with 'facts' from (sometimes never conducted) research, or developing apparently scientific arguments for use in political discussions. Most importantly, this meant framing research within an explicit, a priori political stance. These directives sought to subject the academic to political expectations. In terms of disciplines, the situation was harsher for the social sciences than for technical or natural sciences. Firstly, the Soviet state was deliberately technocratic and generally intervened less in natural and technical sciences than in the social sciences and humanities (Sokolov et al., 2015: 473). Secondly, the social sciences were dominated by one paradigm: keeping up with changing interpretations of Marxism–Leninism, written by Party bureaucrats and leaders, given in addresses and republished in academic journals (Shlapentokh, 1997; Firsov, 2012).

Marxism (even in the Party's awkward interpretation) provided a substantial platform for thinking about social processes, mainly within structural and strain theories. Despite attempts to build a classless society, it was Stalin who insisted that Soviet society be understood as consisting of three major classes: workers, peasants and an intelligentsia (Davies and Harris, 2014: 210). This structure could not be challenged. As for individual actions, these were understood as limited by strains, so that every citizen performed a positive function in the society within a non-conflictual system. However, these structuralist approaches also incorporated a version of social constructivism in its radical social engineering form. Since some individuals did not follow designated roles (there were criminals or political dissidents), it was the task of the Party and fellow citizens to engineer a new person out of them, the real communist (Stites, 1989: 153–5). So human nature was not entirely conditional on the given social circumstances, as it was possible to diverge from existing patterns, as well as to

be consequently subjected to social engineering projects to insert one back (re- socialize one) into society.

Although sexuality studies were mostly silenced in Soviet academia, homosexuality still occasionally featured in the research interests of psychologists and criminologists. Since the 1970s, scholars of

'deviant behaviour' had showed interest in sexuality studies (Alexander, 2018). The only sociological study of gay and lesbian subculture in Russia was conducted after the Second World War. However, this was published in the 1980s in the United States when the sociologist fled the USSR (Kozlovsky, 1986). When not completely silenced, the 'homo- sexual species' (mostly gay men at that time in Soviet history) was a 'social issue' in Soviet society, a particular subject who went wrong and did not contribute to the reproduction of the social system through engaging in heterosexual family life and the division of labour. In the field of sexuality surrounded by silence, there were rare attempts to discuss same-sex relations in books. Rustam Alexander traced how the language of this discussion shifted from early 'bourgeois vice' to communist moral code to anti-Western rhetoric depending on Party leaders' directions:

> After the Communist Party June 1963 Plenum, which was devoted to strategies of confronting 'ideological influence of the West', Soviet sex education changed its focus from the goal of eliminating 'vestiges of the past' to the fight against the 'advancing bourgeois ideology' that allegedly sought to influence 'unstable elements' in Soviet society. As a result, Soviet authors for the first time mentioned homosexuality in a sex education manual, now framing it as a characteristic trait of Western society. (2018: 361)

The methodological assumptions behind these ideas should not come as a sur- prise, for many of the same discussions were widespread in other national academic circles across the globe at the time (Kuhn, 1962; Giddens, 1976; Habermas, 1981). Over time, medical science and psychology gradually shared its interest in homosexuality with other disciplines, most importantly with the social sciences (Weeks, 1985). Lively discussions of sex still arose between biologists and sociologists (Young, 2011: 24). Yet, for many decades, sociology was dominated by structural approaches that viewed societies as rigid organ- isms that rarely contradicted biological views. Talcott Parsons' system theory was particularly influential: he rationalized the current heteronormative order of his social environment as a dominant social structure that excluded same-sex relations as useless or even harmful to the whole system (Parsons, 2005: 34). If in the USSR the political bias was explicitly given in political speeches and documents, in Parsons' example the bias was implicit in his own position as a white middle-class American with a Christian background. Nonetheless, further developments in Western academe challenged these notions. Contributions by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists in the wake of the 1960s' 'sexual revolution' shook Parsonian theories and made way for constructivist approaches to sexuality and gender studies, as well as for other – non-dominant – perspectives on academic research (Rubin, 1975; Weeks, 1985; D'Emilio, 1993).

This situation contributed to a multitude of methodologies in sexuality studies in various academic disciplines.

One aspect is worth highlighting. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, works by Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others marked a departure from the common understanding of sexuality as stable to post-structuralist views of gender and sex as fluid, unstable, and never fully defined (Rubin, 1984; Butler, 1990; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990; de Lauretis, 1991). This perspective came to be known as queer theory, a more radical vision of sexuality than classical constructivism. Many interpretations of queer theory have centred on the idea of performative mechanisms that reproduce certain notions of sexual identities (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1993). While the original authors insisted that performative acts are complex repressive tools of power (Butler, 1993), other scholars saw this theoretical insight as a way of proclaiming sexual freedom of choice or devices that allow one to immediately change one's gender or sexual 'orientation' (Green, 2007: 32).

These discussions have reached Russia only recently but have acquired new interpretations in this national context (Kondakov, 2016). Due to political pressure, a diverse research agenda was not possible until the 1990s. Since the USSR collapsed, social science in Russia has become far more diverse, but this diversity has been constrained by circumstances, from economic devastation to quasi-post- colonial fascination with the West. Most importantly for this discussion about epistemology, the

field of social science in Russia has polarized. Accordingly, sociologist Mikhail Sokolov and his colleagues have identified a clear-cut division in Russian sociology into two camps: East Side and West Side sociologies (Sokolov et al., 2015). East Side scholars are less connected to academia outside Russia, having no experience of international conferences and grant applications. Meanwhile, West Side are more internationalized and exposed to sociology beyond Russian academic literature. These groups are opposed in terms of theories, methodologies, and topics of research. East Side sociology is essentially positivist, generating local knowledge at the expense of international collaboration, and offers expertise to the state authorities in the Soviet police-science style. West Side, in contrast, is dedicated to critical theories and constructivist methodologies; praising international journals and authors. This scholarship is generally sceptical of the Russian government's initiatives. According to Sokolov's surveys of sociologists, if they answer his questions in support of same-sex marriage, this locates them on the West Side, whereas denial of it increases the probability of them belonging to the East Side. For almost two decades, these bipolar parts of Russian sociology cohabited without major tensions, until the sexual wars that I discuss below revived in their debates.

More to the point, Nadia Nartova (2007), a queer sociologist, described gay and lesbian studies in post-Soviet Russia as mainly concentrated in new gender studies departments supported by international funds and institutions. Though her view is pessimistic, she has documented several important studies in queer

sociology. To sum up her analysis, during the 1990s and 2000s exchange between Russian and Western scholars intensified as Russia's national borders opened up to the world. This openness significantly enhanced studies of sexuality by introducing contemporary methodological tools from international social sciences. Moreover, foreign scholars have contributed greatly to the studies of queer folks in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Tuller, 1996; Essig, 1999; Healey, 2001; Baer, 2009). Even more importantly, many of these scholars have addressed the peculiar queer subjectivity in post-Soviet Russia, due to their particular historical, social, and political conditions. The argument advanced here is that the homosexual subject has never fully emerged in Russia, because, instead of manifesting as sexual identity, it has retained its elusive characteristic features. As these scholars argue, sexual subjectivities are queer, fluid, and unstable in Russia (Essig, 1999; Amico, 2014; Stella, 2015).

This approach to the analysis of sexuality and critique of sexual identity explicitly refers to queer theory in its post-structuralist non-identitarian version. 'Queer' was initially meant to be an opposition to gay and lesbian or LGBT studies. Queer methodologies were offered to criticize identity-based politics and scholarship from a non-conservative standpoint, because identities were understood as just another form of power (Jagose, 1996: 83, 91). While contributions to queer theory have mainly been made from the post-structuralist perspective, it has also been affected by reification of the notion of 'queer' (Floyd, 2009) and – paradoxically – its gradual formation as just another kind of identity (Levy and Johnson, 2012). The Russian case shows that 'queer- ness' here still does not refer to identity, but to an unsolidified phenomenon that challenges conventional concepts of sexual orientation. Within this epis-temological understanding of sexuality, queerness opposes identity as a notion rooted in dichotomous psychological medical terms contracted by structuralist approaches in social sciences. Regardless of whether this view of Russian sexuality is adequate or not, the important thing is that the language of queer theory reflected the condition of the homosexual subjectivity that has been the focus of Russian sexuality research.

Therefore, in Russia, vocabulary was defined and queer bodies were vocalized within research and education at the same time as new approaches in international social science were being learnt and developed after the fall of the USSR. Despite the clear colonial character of the process of learning new theories (reflected in Sokolov's vision of East/West sociology), a doubt can be raised as to whether post-Soviet academia has been structured in these dichotomous ways. In fact, Russian sexuality research in the social sciences is a very elusive arena – a queer science as I propose to call it – that always escapes

final definition (Kondakov, 2016). The reason for this is that sexuality research is performed by individuals who are not necessarily affiliated with institutions that explicitly consider gender or queer theory. They are rank-and-file lecturers and professors at Russian universities who teach classes on an 'Introduction to Sociology' or 'Contemporary

Theories of Social Psychology', always paying attention to queer themes in their lectures. Teaching and using queer theory in their research and pedagogic activities is rather an occasional interest that manifests itself in a few publications or classes (see an edited volume that featured many Russian and international scholars in the field: Kondakov, 2014b). They work in isolation often without the exchange of ideas, so some have to reinvent the wheel of queer theory. Yet they stimulate the use of queer theory across the country's large territory.

Because of these conditions that structure the field of social research in Russia, these scholars tend to express interest in new approaches to sexuality, but some- times fail to grasp complex theoretical arguments of post-structuralism, as the example below shows. The lengthy development of social science under constraints of direct political rule, poor knowledge of current international debates and general appreciation of status over the merits of the research in the publication policies of most Russian academic journals – all this means that queer manifestations of scholars' thinking are not always polished by editorial interventions or conference critics. These texts differ, but usually clearly demonstrate the author's political position. In this regard, the following example illustrates two things. Firstly, it shows the low level of theoretical consideration in Russian social science. Secondly, it displays the authors' political affiliation towards queer sexuality debates, which is welcoming of diversity. This quotation should be read as a combination of both these points:

> The postmodern gender philosophy poses an agenda that problematizes the identity of homosexuals and lesbians. 'Queer identity' is proposed as a relevant terminology that reflects deeper understanding of female homosexuality ... Same-sex relations happen between men (homosexualism) and between women (lesbianism). Among homosexuals and lesbians, there is a division of sex roles. In a homosexual couple, one man voluntarily per- forms feminist [sic] functions constantly or temporarily: his behaviour is expressive, communicative, and cooperative. The other man, the former man's partner, has masculine functions: his behaviour is instrumental, active, and competitive. But homosexuals do not have multiple personalities – this is an integrated personality who sincerely loves a person of his own sex. (Baranov and Zolotareva, 2012: 133)[1]

Before going into detail, one idea is worth stressing right away: the division between Western and Eastern social science is not as clear as it may seem in Russia. These scholars support LGBT rights (they point to 'love' to express their positioning on the issue) as some 'Western' sociologists would do. But they also lack the language to articulate this support in social science terms, like 'Eastern' sociologists who never updated their knowledge after the fall of the USSR. As a result, they mix various approaches, often in a contradictory manner. Baranov and Zolotareva (2012) convey 'objective' terms (references to psychiatry and structuralist understanding of sex 'roles') and within that discourse, they want to advance post-structuralist queer theory. The intention here is to show that there is no controversy in such a move, but just an indication of how complex social science is in Russia today, as is the entire contemporary episteme.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION UNDER PRESSURE

The diversity of scholarship described above changed with the introduction of the law banning homosexual 'propaganda' for which the government required the service of scholars in the Soviet style. Although police science has never disappeared in Russia, the government has not sought its expertise. As the discussions about the law on 'propaganda' advanced, this expertise was once again in demand. The most publicly articulate was the 'propaganda' bill introduced by the St Petersburg regional

parliament in 2011 (Law of St Petersburg, 2012). It generated lively discussions in the press (Pronkina, 2016) and – more importantly – in academic publications. In fact, some sociologists from the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences even claimed that the law was their idea, even though it had circulated across the Russian regions beforehand (see Kondakov, 2014a: 163):

> Demographic crisis is an acute social issue in Russia, as well [like in Europe]. Yet, active propaganda of homosexual behaviour and wide spread of sexual crimes against children are new global challenges that require not only an adequate, but also a sharp response. On the one hand, this reaction must ensure protection of societal interests, and, on the other hand, it must guarantee citizens' right to private life. As the authors argue, these goals can be achieved by a complex of measures that seeks to protect the natural psychosexual development of children. The major threat to such development is propaganda of deviant sexual behaviour. (Dyachenko and Pozdnyakova, 2013: 110)

This quotation, from an article in the journal *Sociological Science and Social Practice*, argues that the government was correct in limiting the public expression of queer sexualities by law. The sociologists imply that homosexuality is associated with child molestation. By the time of the publication, 12 regions across Russia adopted the 'propaganda' legislation and a similar bill had been debated in the Duma at the federal level (Kirichenko and Sozayev, 2013). It was adopted later in the same year. Instead of following the regional pattern by naming prohibited sexualities (for example, buggery, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism in the St Petersburg legislation), federal parliamentarians deliberately embraced a vague language of euphemism so that the text of law itself did not promote homosexuality:

> Propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors by age [is] dissemination of information that seeks to form non-traditional sexual attitudes in minors, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, perverted perception of social equality between traditional and non-traditional sexual relations... (Federal Law of the Russian Federation, 2013)

This legal definition assumes the notion of sexual identity and orientation as fluid or at least changeable. The law protects children from exposure to information about queer sexuality because legislators believe children are inherently heterosexual but can change their sexual orientation if they are introduced to alternative sexualities. As such, the law is a protectionist censorship law that

unwittingly establishes that heterosexual subjects are never fully stable. The text of the law shows that the language of queer theory is relevant to the Russian context: queer discourse acknowledges that a particular kind of sexuality is non- sense, because boundaries between different known kinds are blurred.

Further, academic publications that cultivate this changeable notion of sexual identity are analysed in order to establish the particular form the homo- sexual subject currently takes in Russia. I have analysed court decisions that cite the 'propaganda law'. Many of the rulings included testimonies by academic experts invited by the courts to say whether a piece of text is 'propaganda of non- traditional sexual relations'. The majority of these experts had a social science or humanities background. Their expertise was relevant, not because they were experts in sexual desire, but because they could give opinions on texts that 'prop- agate' queerness. Their disciplinary expertise in social sciences and humanities was needed to determine whether texts contained 'propaganda'; the court did not look for people to say whether they had turned gay after reading the texts. Hence, I also looked at publications in social science journals during the discussions of the propaganda bills in Russia at the regional and federal levels (2012–14) to determine the current form of the subject of discourse within social science expertise on homosexuality.

The major sentiment behind most of the academic publications is that queer sexualities are disastrous for societies. For example, Professor Leonid Ionin of the Higher School of Economics offered an ultra-conservative theory of 'minority rebellion'. According to him, various groups such as migrant workers, political opposition, and LGBT citizens threaten the integrity and existence of the Russian state. In his conclusion, he retreats from some of his assumptions and limits his call to eliminate minorities:

> since the issue of aggressive minority groups is so important for current socio-political discussions in our country, it is necessary to give some sort of explanation of the socio-political position on which this concept of minorities stands... These groups will inevitably claim opportunities for expression, and the task of the state authority is not to suppress these, but to moderate them so that the boundaries set by the cultural tradition and public morals may be observed (put straightforwardly: gay carnivals are unacceptable in an Orthodox country). As for creation by minorities of closed and relatively self-sufficient communities, this is acceptable and it is not fatal to the life of the state. (Ionin, 2012: 237)

In his text, Professor Ionin protects the public sphere from the intervention of queer (and other different) elements. Ionin represents a liberal university. In his arguments throughout the book, he offers no explanation as to why transgender people, gay men, or lesbians are bad; he just feels this is so. Yet his thinking is shaped by a structuralist understanding of society as a non-conflictual system. Importantly, as the excerpt above shows, Ionin sees the state as a living organism that may tolerate 'closed and relatively self-sufficient communities', but can die if the toxicity becomes intolerable. In this argument, he significantly departs from more straightforwardly antagonistic scholars, who refuse the possibility of

tolerating queer expression on any level. These scholars include Elena Novosyelova, who is an associate professor at the traditionally conservative Department of Family Sociology in Moscow University. She published the results of her study of the 'homosexual movement' that she conducted by browsing Internet publications of interviews with Margaret Thatcher and US evangelicals' speeches. She concludes that if the situation continues to develop as it is (LGBT individuals get more rights in various countries, including marital rights), then '[o]n one "wonderful day" we may well wake up in a world where traditional families and children are criminalized, while homosexuality and infertility are promoted' (Novosyelova, 2013: 102).

Once sociologists see societies as systems in which various elements work to ensure reproduction of the existing conditions perceived as desirable by the authors of the research, then elements that seem external to this system are understood as threats. The influence of Parsons – as well as other structuralist and strain approaches – is quite obvious here. The political position of the researcher rarely becomes a matter of reflection, yet it is crucial to the approach. The researcher's social positioning as heterosexual, white, and dominant in terms of class (an intellectual or member of the intelligentsia) conveys the Russian police-science perspective about queer sexuality. In their work, these scholars seek to establish their own system of social relations and political opinion (attuned to directives from the state) as the only legitimate version of society. By doing so, they rein- force hegemonic power relations.

Sexuality plays a very important role in this process. This topic has become so significant not simply because of the government's legal regulation of queer sexualities, but also because the theme echoed scholars' personal concerns. The discussions of sexuality in academic publications reveal the fear of loss that the authors struggle with. Their own heterosexuality is threatened by queerness – that particular dominant position in a given society, which they feel they may lose because of social changes. Predominantly, this fear of loss manifests itself as the scholars discuss the central role of marriage in Russia. Marriage exemplifies heterosexual dominance in their view; as soon as marital rights are expanded to include same-sex relations, the entire society collapses:

> However, today, gay activists demand that the world of a homosexual be attributed with all the provisions of the world of the heterosexual community (rights, institutions, guarantees, and so on). In other words, they seek legal recognition of gay marriages, gay celebrations, and gay propaganda in the public sphere. But this eventually leads to unacceptably wide interpretations and legal recognition of such fundamental institutions as 'marriage' and 'family' which in turn may cause a negative 'multiplication effect' in all social institutions and practices. (Shchelkin, 2013: 140)

In this publication Aleksandr Shchelkin, a leading researcher of the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences and author of many Russian sociology textbooks, predicts that social institutions

will crash as the LGBT rights agenda advances: there will be no 'family' anymore, but multiple versions of

families (of people with different sexualities). He sees this course as a process of weakening a solid social institution and, consequently, weakening the entire society. Hence, the heterosexual version of family is at the core of his notion of society and he does not want a society that is not upheld by heterosexual kinship. Soviet scholars saw homosexuality and family as opposites as well (Kondakov, 2014a; Alexander, 2018). It is reasonable to suggest that same-sex marriages do change societies. Yet political sentiment towards this change differs in sociological interpretations: support for recognizing a wider range of families defines critics of the current status quo, whereas critique of these changes identifies conservatives in academic research.

Interestingly, Soviet sociology was based on Marxist critical theory. However, sociologists who worked previously in the USSR through its transition to Russia seem less likely to be critical in their social studies. Marxism of the Soviet type struggled with its internal tensions. Since, in accordance with Party directives, Soviet society contained no social conflicts (the three classes peacefully lived together), scholars could not be critical of this society, regardless of the critical drive of their grand Marxist theory. Perhaps this is why texts by Russian scholars host seemingly contradictory views without acknowledging their contradictions. Since accommodating a mismatch between critical methodology and the impossibility of societal critique lay at the core of academic knowledge production in the USSR, scholars still see no problem in doing so today. In this regard, analysis of the homosexual subject given in the texts demonstrates how two contrasting notions of homosexuality easily and logically reside in the same academic narrative. Consider this fragment of an article by two Sociological Institute researchers, Oleg Bozhkov and Tatiana Protasenko:

> This topic [homosexuality] takes too much space and time in media today, and it is literally inserted into public consciousness. Some data suggest that in various countries (especially in big cities) statisticians find that from 7 to 15% of individuals have a non-traditional sexual orientation. Since this number statistically significantly exceeds 'medical' (genetic) calculations, it is possible to conclude that the difference is made up of people who do not have the biological precondition for this. Hence, this phenomenon is not of medical (genetic) character, but cultural, social, and political. In other words, it is a sort of indulgence to con- temporary fashion to be creative, unusual and non-standard (today it is simply improper to be standard). Furthermore, interest in this issue is also caused by wrongly understood 'human rights' and, related to these rights, claims to certain entitlements and privileges guaranteed by society and the state. (Bozhkov and Protasenko, 2012: 158)

This short quotation captures many characteristics already discussed above: poor argumentation (for example, references to some data from an unidentified source) and general nostalgia generated by the possible loss of heterosexual dominance (in this instance, for those who are 'normal' or 'standard'). The authors claim that once you identify as lesbian or gay in Russia, you are entitled to privileges, which is not the case. Yet the work also hints at another important discursive feature that has been less obvious in previous examples. In this article, there is a methodological alignment of contradictory paradigms – both medical

essentialist and social constructivist approaches to sexual identity. Bozhkov and Protasenko (2012) suggest there are two different types of homosexual subject. Firstly, there is the medical homosexual subject who is not 'responsible' for her or his sexual 'orientation' because it is simply a biological fact. This subject is calculable and easily identifiable with the help of scientific procedures; its numerical manifestation seems to be stable over time (and space). Secondly, the homosexual subject can be seduced by the 'fashion' to be different, and can choose to become so. This subject is growing in numbers ('especially in big cities') as information about homosexuality circulates in the media, attracting and converting people.

The combination of essentialist and constructivist approaches should not be read as illogical. It supports the role of the state authority to restrict expressions of homosexuality in the media (censorship) and at the same time limits state authority regarding violence towards LGBT people. Since some homosexuals are 'natural', the state cannot act to reverse their nature. The scholars seek to confirm a hierarchical structure in which various sexual differences are assigned different levels of recognition. Heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals are still allowed to coexist in certain ways, because this keeps the hegemony of hetero- sexuality intact. If there are no differences, a hierarchy makes no sense. Hence, the logic manifested in the work of Bozhkov, Protasenko, and others identifies and reinforces the hierarchy. This is in contrast to alternative or oppositional analytical approaches that identify and attempt to challenge existent hierarchies so that societies can become more egalitarian. Note however that according to the conservatives' logic, heterosexuality is changeable. Heterosexuality is more unstable than homosexuality, as a person may stop being a heterosexual simply by being exposed to 'propaganda'. However, one cannot become heterosexual by watching heterosexuality on TV (instead, these scholars defend more com- plex 'conversion therapies': see, for example, Shvecova, 2015). In this sense, the sexuality these scholars describe is queer because it is never fully clear where the boundary between various sexualities lies: this sexuality is fluid, unstable, and elusive.

CONCLUSION

This interpretation of the texts shows that the conventional dispute between essentialists and constructivists in Western scholarship is not relevant to the debates on sexuality in Russia. On the contrary, both seemingly contradictory approaches coexist in Russian academic articles and sometimes even attempt to support one another. These combined approaches also sustain a more general logic of current research and policy. In other words, there is no question about whether one is born into or can change one's sexual orientation, because the answer is both, according to these commentaries. The point is that this

understanding of sexuality produces a very particular sexual subject in the social science discourse in Russia. This subject is split in two. One part rests on a per- son's essential truth about her or himself, the kind of sexuality with which they are born. Another part of the subject is performative and can be conditioned by environmental factors such as 'homosexual propaganda'. Importantly, constructivism is understood in Soviet social engineering terms. The point is not that notions are constructed and interpreted under the complicated intertwined influence of many different historical, social, and political factors; rather, persons are constructed within a short period of time by 'propaganda' through media such as newspapers, the law, and education.

The discussion of sexuality in recent publications by Russian social science scholars gives rise to several separate more general themes. First of all, it is important to underline the acceptance of a new queer episteme in sexuality studies shared by both queer scholars and conservative researchers in Russia. The stable modernist homosexual subject is not there anymore. Rather, the notion of fluent currency of sexuality shapes thinking about sexual identity at both poles of the academic field. Strict boundaries set by 'sexual orientation' discourse are blurred to give way to a new form of sexuality outside psychophysical theory of desire. Scholars of various political and methodological colours acknowledge that sexuality is queer: people are not born in sexual boxes, but constantly experience performative effects of social, historical, and political forces that eventually form practices subject to plasticity and modification. Although I have only shown those instances of this argument that insist on making heterosexual people queer, there is another facet of this idea that refers to conversion therapies about the opposite transfer of desire (which are beyond the scope of this study). This is a crucial shift in academic discourse; decades of queer theory development inform the understanding of sexual desires and eventually become a conventional way of thinking about sex. This latter idea is also a new challenge for queer theorizing.

Yet, secondly, there is a substantial difference in how social scientists assess this new interpretation of sexuality. Queer theory explicitly recognizes political bias in academic research. The scholars whose work is analysed here belong to a different group in this regard: they claim to present 'objective' scientific knowledge regardless of the political language in their publications. The major difference here is that queer theorists deliberately position themselves on the critical side of debates, as they consider current inequalities in their sexuality studies while arguing for social change. The conservative scholars argue against change, because their political affiliation is with the status quo. They do not critically examine their political views but rather take them for granted as common knowledge: they believe the status quo requires policing, with the tools of either law or academic research. The foundations of sexuality are shaking, but researchers tend to see different futures in the aftermath.

Thirdly, I believe that conservative scholarship merits more attention than it is currently receiving. The political position of conservative scholars should not

be a matter of snobbish indifference, but of detailed scrutiny. In 'progressive' scholarship, strong political views are praised: when scholars reveal that they take a feminist or queer approach, they signal to readers crucial methodological elements of their research. Conservative scholars only implicitly claim their perspective (through argumentation, references, vocabulary, and so forth), but this perspective still forms a part of their research design and protocol. Once we learn how to reveal and differentiate between various shades of conservatism, we better understand advances in our common discourse, since the basic understanding of the shifting character of sexualities is shared by both camps. In learning the political preferences of the scholars in question, we also familiarize ourselves with a probably massive, yet disregarded as outdated, scholarship on sexuality that may exist not only in Russia, but in many other national sociologies, including in the West, and remains invisible to our oppositional camp.

Note

1 All quotations from Russian sources are given in the author's translations.

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